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CHALLENGES OF OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP FOR TODAY'S COMMANDER

by

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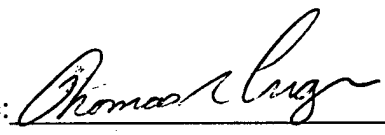
A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: 

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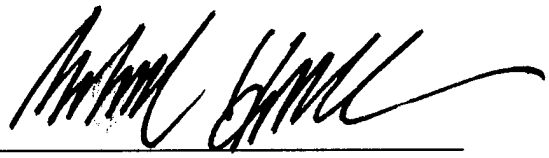

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Operational level leaders are faced with the challenge of how to effectively deal with a wide array of new technology. Nowhere is this felt more than in the realm of information technology. Rapid advances in this field have led advocates to tout information technology as the panacea to many problems. This "revolution in military affairs" that this new technology promises has critical implications for today's operational commander. This paper examines the several challenges that senior military leaders will be forced to address as technology becomes an ever increasing part of the United States' defense structure. The "tools" needed by the operational commander to tackle these challenges are available and are embedded in an enduring set of leadership functions. A model is presented that attempts to encompass these major operational leadership functions and provide a logical and systematic approach for the senior military leader. The model focuses on a process examining the following functions: develop a vision, gather information, analyze the situation, decide on a course of action, plan and allocate resources, communicate, implement and evaluate results. This paper emphasizes these timeless set of leadership functions and an historical figure (British Field Marshall Sir William Slim) is used to highlight their enduring relevance.

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Abstract of

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Operational level leaders are faced with the challenge of how to effectively deal with a wide array of new technology. Nowhere is this felt more acutely than in the realm of information technology. Rapid advances in this field have led advocates to tout information technology as the panacea to many problems. This "revolution in military affairs" that this new technology promises has critical implications for today's operational commander. This paper examines the several challenges that senior military leaders will be forced to address as technology becomes an ever increasing part of United States' defense structure. The "tools" needed by the operational commander to tackle these challenges are available and are embedded in an enduring set of leadership functions. A model is presented that attempts to encompass these major operational leadership functions and provide a logical and systematic approach for the senior military leader. The model focuses on a process examining the following functions: develop a vision, gather information, analyze the situation, decide on a course of action, plan and allocate resources, communicate, implement and evaluate results. This paper emphasizes these timeless set of leadership functions and an historical figure (British Field Marshall Sir William Slim) is used to highlight their enduring relevance.

"Wars may be fought by weapons, but they are won by men. It is the spirit of the men who follow and of the man who leads that gains the victory." [1]

Gen. George S. Patton

Operational Leadership Challenges

Military officers today, especially those at the senior level of command, are faced with a diverse spectrum of challenges in this era of fast paced technology and high tempo operations. Much has been written regarding the potential impact of the exponential increase of technology on the modern battlefield. This "revolution in military affairs" that new technology promises has critical implications for today's operational commander. This paper examines the several challenges that senior military leaders will be forced to address as technology becomes a more influential component of our national defense structure. **The senior military commander's ability to meet these new challenges will be largely dependent upon his success at performing a timeless set of leadership functions**. The leadership functions of the operational level commander will be examined and an historical figure (British Field Marshall Sir William Slim) will be used to highlight their enduring relevance. A model illustrating these operational leadership functions is also developed and presented.

Technology and the Operational Commander

The fact that most military officers, regardless of their specialty, have to deal with a myriad of advanced technical systems on a daily basis is undeniable. Nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of information technology. The rate of growth in the information field is nearly incomprehensible. The amount of information available to today's military officer, especially the

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[1] Robert D. Heinl, Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 178.

operational level commander, is voluminous and highly detailed. Military planners rely on these information technologies to gain decisive advantages in future conflicts. A principle tenet in *Joint Vision 2010* states, "improvements in information and systems integration technologies...will gain dominant battle space awareness"[2]. One does not have to wait until the year 2010 to see the ramifications of this information technology trend. Today's operational leaders are already deluged with vast quantities of information from innumerable sources. The staffs of senior officers are taxed to their limit to filter this avalanche of data in order to provide their commander with meaningful information. There appears to be a current mindset that more information is better, but the reality is that only relevant information is better. The senior officer is challenged to develop an efficient "information filtering system" to ensure that he only deals with pertinent facts. This flood of information into the senior level headquarters will likely increase with technological advances. The effectiveness of the commander's "filtering system" will also have to correspondingly improve.

In the near term, this information filtering system will continue to require human beings to make value judgments regarding the relevance of information received. Since staff sizes are unlikely to significantly increase to handle this function, the operational commander must develop a means by which manageable quantities of information are received at his headquarters. This will require the commander to increasingly empower his subordinate unit commanders to make decisions regarding the relevance of information before it is passed to the operational commander's headquarters. However, the senior commander will still be overwhelmed if he does not provide the various intelligence gathering organizations with

[2] Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Vision 2010. Washington D.C.: July 1996. p.13

guidance regarding the specific type of information desired. Developing an effective information filtering network now is important to the senior military leader, but it will become absolutely critical to his success in the future.

A direct consequence of this "technology revolution" is that a senior commander may be lured into "waiting just a while longer" for more information from his advanced sensor systems before making a key decision. Proponents of these technologies suggest that the inherent uncertainty of battle maybe largely eliminated in the near future: "Technology could enable U.S. military forces in the future to lift the 'fog of war'...dominate battle space awareness - the ability to see and understand everything on the battlefield - might be possible."[3] Although Admiral Owens is clearly referring to some point in the future, information systems have already become so advanced that this has become an important issue for today's commander. The senior military leader rarely knows everything he wants to know, especially during combat operations. Advanced information gathering capabilities may reduce the "fog of war," but it is extremely doubtful that it will ever be entirely eliminated. The operational leader will continue to have to make critical decisions with incomplete information. Often what is needed by the senior commander is not more sensor information but better understanding of the political, economic and cultural factors that influence a situation in order to make a sound and timely decision.

Another issue that technology advocates tend not to emphasize is that no amount of sophisticated intelligence, surveillance or reconnaissance (ISR) hardware or integrated information systems will tell the senior military leader what he often needs to know the most: what is in the mind of his opponent. Under "ideal" circumstances, these sophisticated sensors and

[3] William Owens, "Breakthrough Could Give Forces Total Command of Future Battlefield". Inside the Navy, 23 January 1995.

integrated processor may provide the operational leader with an accurate picture of the enemy's order of battle and disposition. However, there are two significant challenges that these enhanced sensor and information gathering capabilities present to the operational commander:

1) An opponent familiar with U.S. ISR capabilities will likely attempt to deceive them using "low tech" and inexpensive methods. It is not unreasonable to expect an enemy to use his available resources to attempt to confuse our most advanced radar, photographic and thermal imaging systems. This is a potential enemy capability that the senior commander must keep in the forefront of his mind as he reviews ISR information. Validating this information through more traditional (but higher risk) methods such as SOF team reconnaissance may be the commander's only recourse.

2) Assuming an accurate and detailed picture of enemy forces is obtained through ISR sources, a commander may still err by confusing ease of counting with counting only those things which are meaningful. During Vietnam, "body count" of enemy dead combatants was used as a measure of effectiveness (MOE) to determine the war's progress. Senior officers and Department of Defense officials emphasized this body count MOE largely because it was relatively easy to tabulate rather than being a meaningful measure of the enemy's will to continue the war. Modern ISR capabilities now provide the operational level leader with a vast array of sensor capabilities, affording him an impressive quantity of detailed data (e.g. number of enemy vehicles destroyed, soldiers killed and amount of infrastructure damaged). All this near real time sensor information may tempt the commander to choose a MOE that is readily available and easily quantifiable, but which is totally inappropriate for the situation . Frequently, the most critical factors when attempting to discern an enemy's status are those intangible elements which

cannot be directly measured by any ISR asset, e.g. morale and loyalty of the enemy's troops, intent of the commander or national resolve of the opponent's population. None of these crucial elements will show up on any satellite photo. This is not to infer that these ISR capabilities should not be used, but rather the senior commander should ensure that he is drawing the correct conclusions from them and validating their reliability from other sources whenever possible.

The final significant technology challenge facing the operational commander deals with the wide spread enthusiasm in some U.S. military circles for the broad application of this technology to the battlefield. That the United States' technological superiority may provide us with a vital military edge in some circumstances is not in dispute. The danger for the operational commander is to equate superior American technological capabilities with decisive military advantage in all scenarios. The senior commander must avoid overestimating the advantage of technology and realize its limitations as soon as possible in a conflict. Rough terrain, inclement weather or a congested urban setting may significantly degrade the performance and usefulness of our best weapons systems and sensors. Surely an operational commander must expect that a savvy opponent will attempt to fully exploit his environment by taking advantage of a triple canopy jungle or a densely populated urban area to foil the U.S. technological edge. The challenge for the commander will be to fully and rapidly comprehend the circumstances under which our technology will provide important leverage and also to know when it will not.

Operational Leadership Functions

"Command is that mixture of example, persuasion and compulsion by which you get men to do what you want them to do, even if they don't want to do it themselves."[4]

[4] William Slim, "Higher Command in War", Kermit Roosevelt Lecture, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1952.

Regardless whether the revolution in military affairs ever reaches the full fruition that its proponents envision, **the essential functions of the operational military leader will remain the same.** Advances in technology offer today's senior commander many new tools to assist him in performing his duties, but in the end, his fundamental tasks have not (and will not) change. The characteristics that made for a successful operational combat commander, decades or even centuries ago, remain virtually unchanged. Although many volumes have been written regarding leadership in general, the operational level commander faces unique leadership challenges. However, the methods employed to effectively cope with these challenges are not unique to this day and age. Many senior commanders throughout history have been extremely successful in leading large military units under difficult circumstances by skillfully performing a series of critical leadership functions. Doubtless, many of history's most legendary commanders performed these functions without consciously distinguishing them as an explicit set of leadership functions. I submit however, that all successful operational commanders performed these key leadership functions routinely .

Before examining these functions in detail, it is useful to briefly review the military career of one of the most successful and respected operational combat leaders of World War II - Field Marshall Sir William Slim. The superb manner in which he performed the "operational leadership functions" provides valuable insight and enduring lessons for senior military leaders today. Field Marshall Slim's military service spanned over four decades and witnessed his rise from a beleaguered junior officer in the trenches of World War I to a victorious Field Marshall serving in the Burma-India Theater in World War II. Wounded twice in World War I, Slim loathed trench warfare as unimaginative and a waste of trained soldiers. "This concern for the

thoughtless use of resources stayed with Slim throughout his career."[5] He spent the interwar years in India where he gained valuable insight regarding the training and leading of foreign troops. During this period he also studied the fledgling concepts of air power and mechanized warfare. This was a pivotal time in Slim's life as he labored to acquire the knowledge and experience that would prove so instrumental in his trials ahead.

At the onset of World War II, Slim was sent to Ethiopia to fight the Germans and Italians. It was in North Africa that Slim suffered the first of several initial military reverses. Outnumbered and poorly supported, he was forced to conduct a series of withdrawals. That he was able to do so in an orderly fashion is testimony to his skill as a commander. It was his experience in the desert that caused Slim to later remark, "I'm a hell of a general when I'm winning, anybody is, but it's when you're not winning - it is then that the real test of leadership is made."[6] North Africa was also where, as author Ronald Lewin notes, "Slim learned a lesson to trust his instincts in battle and to choose the audacious over the careful in many cases ensured success."[7] Slightly wounded in Africa, he was promoted and assigned command of the 10th Indian Division serving in Persia. Here, Slim came into his own element as he trained and organized a superb fighting force which, although outnumbered, soundly defeated its Axis opponents. These early campaigns were merely a precursor for what was to prove to be Slim's greatest challenge - assignment to the Burma-India Theater.

Slim arrived in theater in March 1942 to take command of two under-strength divisions that made up the Burma Corps. Deficient in every material resource, Slim's mission was clear:

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[5] Michael Alexander, "Operational Battle Command: The Doorway to Versatility", (Unpublished Research Paper, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1995) p. 13

[6] William Slim, "Higher Command in War", Kermit Roosevelt Lecture, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1952.

[7] Ronald Lewin, Slim: The Standard Bearer, p. 67.

defend Rangoon, but fall back as necessary to preserve the Corps. Faced with insurmountable odds, Slim managed to conduct an orderly retreat of nearly 1000 miles under extremely arduous conditions. Although badly beaten in Burma, the men of Slim's Corps maintained their discipline and unit cohesiveness throughout this ordeal. His confident demeanor and continual presence on the battlefield were crucial to bolstering the morale of his troops. Effective communications with his subordinate commanders became Slim's trademark during this trying period. He endeavored to convey his commander's intent in person whenever possible. Even as he retreated, Slim was commencing preparations within his Corps to launch a counter-offensive and regain the initiative.

Slim thoroughly internalized the lessons learned in the early Burma campaign and spent most of the remainder of 1943 instilling the tenets of jungle warfare into his troops. In late 1943, Slim was given command of Fourteenth Army and tasked with reopening the severed overland supply routes to China. Continually plagued by material shortages (as a result of the relatively low priority given the Burma-India Theater), Slim fostered innovative approaches to seemingly intractable logistical problems. One of Slim's favorite sayings became, "God helps those who help themselves."[8] By December 1943, Slim had revitalized the Fourteenth Army and forged it into a highly efficient jungle warfare fighting force. He immediately seized the initiative from the Japanese by launching a bold offensive into Burma. Slim's adept ability to manage all operational leadership functions was nowhere more evident than during this phase of the Burma campaign. He astutely **analyzed the situation** and developed his campaign plan emphasizing key Allied strengths and critical Japanese Army weaknesses. He decisively **chose a sound**

[8] William Slim, Defeat into Victory. (Hong Kong: Papermac 1972) p. 169

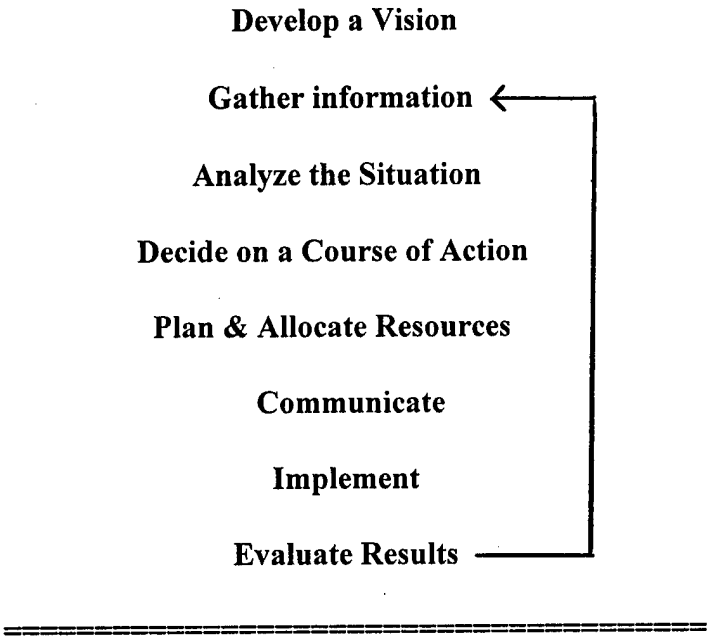
course of action based on the best information he had available and then **allocated his resources** accordingly. While his headquarters personnel thoroughly **planned** the counter-offensive in Burma, Slim personally ensured that his staff never intruded on the ability of his subordinate commanders to exercise their own initiative. Slim also was a master at **communicating** his plans, intent and desires to subordinates, as well as to his superiors. It was this ability to **impart his vision** of the desired end state to all members of his command that was instrumental to his subordinate commanders' ability to successfully operate independently during the chaos of battle.

Finally, after all preparations for his Burma offensive were in place, Slim **implemented** his ambitious campaign plan with supreme confidence in both himself and his army. This air of confidence that Slim exuded was an important factor in maintaining the morale of his forces. Slim's counter-offensive into Burma met initially with stiff Japanese resistance, but succeeded in breaking out of the jungle and onto the open plains where he unleashed his mechanized units. Constantly **evaluating** the results of each facet of his campaign plan, he made adjustments where necessary to maintain the momentum of his drive. After emerging from the jungle, Slim transformed his army from an unconventional jungle warfare force to a highly mobile and mechanized conventional army. That he was able to perform this transition while his army was on the move and in nearly constant contact with the enemy is testimony to Slim's skills as an operational commander. By the end of the Burma Campaign, Slim's forces had destroyed three Japanese armies and inflicted over 250,000 enemy casualties.[9] How was Field Marshall Slim able to transform his defeated, demoralized troops into a highly trained and motivated force that

[9] Ibid, p.423

inflicted one of the worst defeats upon the Japanese Army in World War II? Clearly, his intuitive insight and superb understanding of the operational leadership functions were key to his success.

It is appropriate to take a closer look at the application of these operational leadership functions and their relevance to today's commander. A model of the critical **Operational Leadership Functions** is summarized below:



When examining this model, it is useful to understand that although the functions appear to be sequential, the commander frequently performs two or more of these tasks simultaneously. Often , there is no clear boundary between the completion of one function and the initiation of the next. Ideally, the commander performs a seamless flow of the tasks in the operational leadership process. A review of each function in more detail will assist in clarifying their timeless applicability to the operational level leader.

** **Develop a Vision:** Above all else, the operational commander must know what he wants his command to do and a general scheme of how to accomplish it. An important prerequisite is that the leader fully understand the mission given him by his superior. The commander's vision should then be based on a relatively long term perspective and focused on the desired end state. This focus is of paramount importance in order to avoid getting bogged down on peripheral matters. A clear commander's vision should translate strategic aims into attainable objectives, which in turn provides the organization definitive direction. It is this ability to envision long term objectives and prioritize them which enables a leader to see the long term path to victory. Above all else, Slim endeavored to ensure his "vision" for the Burma campaign was thoroughly understood throughout his command and remained the central focus of effort.

** **Gather Information:** An operational commander has always (and will continue) to depend on reliable and timely information upon which to base his decisions. It has been discussed earlier the influences and challenges that new information technologies pose. It is the operational level commander's responsibility to define for his staff members, subordinate unit commanders and external intelligence gathering agencies his specific information requirements. The senior commander should provide explicit guidance delineating not only what type of information is needed but for what purpose. In this manner, the operational commander may reduce the influx of extraneous data he must contend with and ensure that pertinent information is readily available. Slim was exceptionally successful at greatly reducing the quantity of extraneous data flowing into his headquarters. He did this by continually forcing his staff and his subordinate commanders to exercise their best judgment by weeding out superfluous information and providing him with only the timely and relevant facts. Slim thoroughly trusted his subordinates

to correctly filter this information which in turn earned him their complete respect and loyalty. It could be said that Slim relinquished a degree of "hands-on" control of this information gathering process in order to devote his energies to what truly mattered - guiding his army towards the envisioned end state.

**** Analyze the Situation:** Although this is listed as a separate step, an effective operational leader is actually continuously analyzing the situation based on the latest information available. The analysis must focus on identifying those factors of space, force and time which are most likely to influence his own options as well as his opponent's. The commander must rely on his education, training and experience to determine which of the factors and their innumerable sub-elements are most important at any given time. In the end, analysis of the situation depends upon the commander's best judgment regarding which factors should be considered most critical at a particular point in an operation. Extensive staff work, computer modeling and elaborate decision matrixes are only tools which may (or may not) assist the leader in understanding the situation. Slim had this to say about a senior leader's judgment, "The commander who always "guesses right" doesn't really guess, it's a product of all those things, training, knowledge, observation and character"[10]

**** Decide on a Course of Action:** The most critical aspect of this function is for the operational leader to "decide when he must decide". Since it unlikely that any senior commander will ever have all the information he would ideally like to have before making an important decision, a leader must use his best judgment when in this process he has sufficient information, given the time available, that enables him to go forward with a decision. No current or even near term

[10] William Slim, "Higher Command in War", Kermit Roosevelt Lecture, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth , KS: 1952.

"system of systems," "dominant battle space awareness" or "information superiority" will alleviate the operational commander's responsibility from having to manage risk by dealing effectively with uncertainty. Slim realized the truth of this and captured its essence most succinctly when he stated, "The prime task of the commander is to make decisions."[11]

**** Plan & Allocate Resources:** At the higher levels of war, effective operational leadership involves centralized planning and decentralized execution. It is during this part of the process that the senior commander has the opportunity to translate his vision into concrete plans. As the commander develops his military plans in detail, he must consider not only the tenets of operational art and the principles of war but also how to apportion his finite resources. The astute commander realizes that the resources available to him constitute far more than mere numbers of troops, armaments or supplies. Although these elements are important, it is often the "intangible resources" that determine the outcome of battles. These intangible resources of one's own forces that an operational commander would do well to always consider include morale, motivation, level of training, discipline, experience and ability of key combat leaders. Slim devoted considerable effort to developing these abstract qualities within his army and then shrewdly allocated these assets in his plans so as to ensure maximum combat efficiency. He realized that just as the material assets available to him were limited, so too were these intangible resources which he carefully husbanded.

**** Communicate:** Possibly the most overlooked, yet critical aspect of the operational leadership process, this function entails effectively communicating vision and intent throughout the organization. Also integral to this function is the need to keep one's superiors informed and

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[11] Ibid

communicate with appropriate external organizations. Thus, it is incumbent upon the commander to ensure his unit is effectively communicating throughout the chain of command as well as with coalition partners, pertinent U.S. government agencies and applicable civilian non-government organizations. Slim's superb ability to clearly express himself to his subordinates and seniors alike was crucial to his success at conveying his vision for the recapture of Burma. Slim was always very careful to ensure that his written or verbal orders were as simple and straightforward as possible. Slim was acutely aware of the axiom, "...orders and directions which can be understood are not good enough - they should not be able to be misunderstood."[12]

**** Implement:** If the senior level commander has satisfactorily performed the previous functions of the operational leadership process, he should be well situated to allow decentralized execution by his subordinates. The advent of new technologies which permits an operational commander to have near real time access to his subordinate's tactical picture may tempt higher headquarters to "micro-manage" the battle. Nothing would prove more disastrous in the long run than attempts by an operational level leader to dictate specific actions at the tactical level. Slim understood this intuitively when he stated, "...choose your subordinates and then decentralize to them...don't keep dogs and bark yourself."[13]

**** Evaluate Results:** Central to the operational leadership functions is the notion that the commander must periodically reassess the results of his efforts and make adjustments as necessary. In terms of the leadership model, this entails an iterative process whereby the commander receives updates and then modifies his course of action appropriately. As depicted in

[12] Bruce Clarke, "Thoughts on Leadership", p. 3
[13] William Slim, "Higher Command in War", Kermit Roosevelt Lecture, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS: 1952.

the model, this is a continuous process for the operational commander. Slim was exceptionally adept at reevaluating the situation and recognizing the need to maintain flexibility during combat operations. He clearly perceived the need to make critical adjustments to his plans when the occasion so demanded. He also was keenly aware of the delicate balance that must be maintained between ensuring adequate flexibility during operations and losing control through vacillation. How effectively the operational commander performs this reassessment process will determine his success or failure in future conflicts.

**** Train, Develop and Motivate Subordinates:** Not listed as a "function" per se, this aspect of operational leadership is the cornerstone of the process. All other leadership functions are of little value unless the senior commander devotes sufficient time, energy and resources to training, developing and motivating his subordinates. It is the "bedrock" upon which the entire operational leadership process rests. A prime responsibility of a senior commander is to not only provide direction to his organization, but also to ensure his troops have the necessary "tools" to carry out the commander's plans. These tools go beyond the standard material requirements of an army to encompass ensuring one's forces are adequately trained for the planned campaign. Slim recognized early the value of hard and realistic training when preparing for his offensive in Burma. His insistence on continuous and demanding jungle warfare training resulted in greatly improved fighting efficiency, improved morale and decreased casualties. Slim was also able to develop in his men, often by personal example, many of the superb leadership traits he so adeptly practiced. In this manner, Slim was a master not only of the operational leadership functions but also of training, developing and motivating his subordinates to accomplish the most demanding missions.

Conclusion

"The little affair of operational command is something anybody can do"[14]

Adolf Hitler

As with many other things, Hitler could not have been more wrong when he underestimated the challenges arising from operational leadership. Today's military officers who hold senior command positions face many problems that threaten their ability to successfully carry out their responsibilities. Impressive technological advancements have been made that some advocates advertise as a panacea to these problems. The rapid growth of information technology is often touted as having the most significant potential to assist a commander in "lifting the fog of war." However, with the promise of "total battle space awareness" comes a series of challenges that current operational leaders must be prepared to address. Commanders must ensure this information technology does not consume an inordinate amount of their time as it becomes more readily available in ever increasing quantities. Nor should commanders let this technology lure them into unwisely delaying making critical decisions in the vain hope that "perfect" information will become available. Most importantly, commanders must understand that future enemies may attempt asymmetric responses to thwart the U.S. technological edge. A commander who is unable to effectively deal with these challenges that technology poses will ultimately fail. However, the "tools" for an operational leader to succeed are available and are embedded in an enduring set of leadership functions. That many of history's most distinguished military leaders (as exemplified by Field Marshall Slim) have intuitively carried out these functions provides credence to their relevance. A model was presented to delineate the major

[14] Robert D. Heinl, Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1988), p.60.

operational leadership functions and provide a logical approach to assist the commander in tackling these challenges. However, it is important to emphasize that this model only recommends a process by which a commander can apply a systematic methodology to leadership at the operational level. The success of operational leaders depends on their innate ability to apply their experience, training and judgment to effectively perform the leadership functions described in the model. The application of these leadership functions has been (and will continue to be) more of an "art" than a "science".

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